

Tribe's Plans for a Casino Shake Up Sonoma County

Miwok's flip-flop on gambling stirs a controversy. Indians see it as a way out of poverty.

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SONOMA, Calif. -- For nearly a dozen years, leaders of the Northern California Coast Miwok Indian tribe preached a consistent refrain: Other tribes might succumb to the allure of casino wealth, but this landless band would take the high road and avoid gambling.

So folks in Sonoma County, a wine country bastion more comfortable with grapes than gambling, were taken aback when the Coast Miwok announced plans in April for a sprawling casino and resort.

Not only had the tribe moved to purchase a 2,000-acre swath of North Bay ranchland and signed a deal with a Las Vegas gambling company, it also had hired political and financial advisors with close ties to Gov. Gray Davis and U.S. Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.), including the senator's son.

Amid cries of a double-cross, Sonoma County leaders have launched a fierce uphill fight to block the casino, conjuring images of a neon-festooned monstrosity that would create traffic jams, threaten bayside ecological preserves and undercut the wine country's well-cultivated ambience.

They say the Indians pulled a fast one by vowing to stay out of gambling while seeking congressional recognition as a tribe, then reversing course after winning approval. They also question the connection of Doug Boxer to the project, given his mother's part in helping the tribe win federal recognition 2 1/2 years ago.

The tribe "performed this switcheroo," said Paul Kelley, chairman of the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors. "They have gone no-holds-barred into gaming."

Tribal chief Greg Sarris — a college English professor, author and Hollywood screenwriter — decries what he considers an overblown hubbub over the Miwok's plans. He insists there is no skulduggery afoot, an argument echoed by other participants in the deal and by Sen. Boxer.

The explanation for the tribe's flip-flop is simple, Sarris said. After they were reconstituted as the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria, the tribe (still known by most as the Coast Miwok) considered a variety of ventures. They eyed a vineyard, dabbled with the prospect of organic farming, then sampled the idea of building a cheese factory. Nothing penciled out.

A casino, Sarris said, became the best and last choice to pull many of the tribe's 582 members out of poverty.

"We didn't want to go into gaming," he said. "We looked for other ways to survive. But we were, I think, dreaming."

Sarris and his tribe share a common ancestry, a lost heritage and a rediscovery.

The first historical account of the Coast Miwok dates to Sir Francis Drake's voyage of 1579.

Many in the tribe succumbed to disease introduced by Spanish missionaries, then grappled with the

onslaught of Gold Rush settlers. In 1920, the federal government purchased a 14-acre tract near the Sonoma County town of Graton for the remnants of the area's Miwok and Pomo tribes. By 1958, amid a push for Native American assimilation, the Miwok lost their federal recognition.

Sarris, 51, grew up nearby in Santa Rosa, an adopted kid with few prospects and not a clue that he had Native American blood. He finally got on track after high school, attending UCLA as an English literature major. Sarris acted for a time, using his chiseled looks to grab guest spots on such television shows as "CHiPs."

But he returned to college and earned a doctorate at Stanford. He became a professor at UCLA, and now holds a faculty chair at Loyola Marymount University. He lives in a carefully appointed Laurel Canyon home.

Sarris discovered his Miwok roots only in the mid-1980s by tracing birth records to long-lost relatives. He learned that his biological parents were the 16-year-old daughter of an Orange County department store executive and her high school sweetheart, a half-Filipino, half-Indian football star at Laguna Beach High School.

He became tribal chairman in the early 1990s. Sarris rallied the tribe's scattered remnants to fight a series of attempts by other tribes to plant casinos in the heart of Miwok territory, the coveted northern edge of the Bay Area.

The tribe's bid to regain federal recognition, meanwhile, ran into problems at the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the late 1990s. Tribal members opted for an end-run in Congress, eventually turning to Boxer for a bill to formally recognize the tribe but prohibit it from developing a casino.

The bill stalled in the Senate Indian Affairs Committee over concerns that a gambling prohibition could whip up sovereignty problems for all tribes. The ban was dropped, and the tribe's recognition won approval in December 2000.

Gambling interests immediately came calling.

"We were restored Dec. 27, 2000. On Dec. 28, I had 11 phone calls from Las Vegas and other places," Sarris recalled. "And it never stopped. We said thank you, but no thank you."

But then a grape glut sank the tribe's winery prospects. Organic farming was likewise overbooked. A joint venture with a cheese manufacturer offered just \$200,000 a year.

In early 2002, the tribe turned to Darius Anderson, one of California's top lobbyists and an exuberant fund-raiser for Davis.

A development company owned by Anderson, Kenwood Investments, helped the tribe negotiate a deal with Station Casinos of Las Vegas. The Coast Miwok scored a \$1-million signing bonus and a big monthly payment to cover tribal expenses even before the casino is open, Sarris said.

Station Casinos will partner with the tribe to buy land and build the casino. In return, the firm will get a cut of the gambling proceeds.

Doug Boxer helped in the negotiations, although he did not join Kenwood until 2001, almost a year after his mother helped the Miwok win federal recognition.

Sarris said he had no idea Doug Boxer worked for Kenwood when the tribe hired Anderson's firm. Neither Doug Boxer nor Anderson would comment.

Chris Lehane, a former spokesman for the Clinton administration and Al Gore's 2000 presidential campaign, spoke for them. He said there have been no ethical lapses, noting that Doug Boxer and Anderson had nothing to do with the tribe back when Sen. Boxer helped the Miwok obtain recognition.

Foes of the casino are "trying to inflame rather than inform" while the tribe pursues "this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to lift itself out of poverty," he said.

Sen. Boxer, meanwhile, said she was "dismayed, disappointed and distressed" by the Miwok's gambling flip-flop.

"The tribe did the wrong thing by going into gambling when it said it wouldn't," she said.

Facing reelection in 2004, Boxer has recused herself from any further dealings with the Miwok and says she accepts that the episode will probably come back to haunt her on the campaign trail.

Cheryl Schmit for several years has been among California's most dogged foes of tribal gaming, operating a one-woman outfit dubbed Stand Up For California.

She argues that the only real motivation these days for a California tribe to seek federal recognition is to open a casino. Schmit contends Sen. Boxer and the tribe knew the non-gambling stipulation in the legislation would be yanked in the Senate Indian Affairs Committee, a claim Boxer and the tribe deny.

Anderson's connection to Davis, Schmit added, will prove a big help when the tribe begins negotiating later this year for a state compact, a key requirement before gambling can begin.

A spokesman for Davis said that the governor does not handle negotiations with tribes and that his decisions are not swayed by his former fund-raiser.

Sonoma County Supervisor Valerie Brown sees "huge problems" with both the casino and Doug Boxer's role.

"When the son of a senator works with a tribe to negotiate with an investor from Las Vegas, I have some questions," Brown said. "It just doesn't look good."

Brown, however, faces questions of her own. A former assemblywoman, Brown now holds a \$180,000-a-year job as executive director of a coalition of four Los Angeles County cities — Bell Gardens, Commerce, Gardena and Hawaiian Gardens — that have card clubs fighting the growth of tribal casinos.

People in Sonoma County remain divided over the Miwok's proposed casino, which would sit along California 37 between bay marshland and a mix of horse ranches, farms and a motor speedway that attracts big crowds a few times a year.

In Sonoma's picturesque downtown square, wine salesman Rich Farnocchia said, "At this point, anything the tribe gets seems justified, given what they've been through. It's all restitution."

But a few blocks away, Ignazio "Ig" Vella complained that a casino would cause traffic jams on roads

linking Sonoma to the rest of the Bay Area and its most valuable asset — tourists.

"The ones around here who have any brains know it's a problem," said Vella, 74, owner of a cheese factory. "Who will fight the traffic? It'll finish putting the cork in the bottle."

The tribe has offered \$160 million over 20 years to help cash-strapped local governments with traffic, police and schools. But the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors and several neighboring cities continue to oppose the project.

Meanwhile, U.S. Rep. Lynn Woolsey (D-Petaluma) is introducing legislation and has written to Interior Secretary Gale Norton, asking her to consider the "harmful impacts" to surrounding communities before the government allows a casino.

Sarris, once an avowed foe of gambling, now defends it with the fervor of a convert.

The casino project, he said, will be easy on the environment, with more than 1,000 acres of open space and a water treatment plant so sophisticated that its outflow "can be poured right into the wetlands."

Sarris talks up the fact that the 2,000-slot casino and 200-room hotel would hire only union employees, a rarity in Indian country these days. As for tacky neon glitz, Sarris insists he'll have none of that. Plans call for a sophisticated, southern Mediterranean look.

"It'll be the foremost casino resort west of the Mississippi," he said.

Sarris says he hasn't received a dime, despite ever-bigger headaches.

"I personally have mixed feelings about gaming," Sarris said. "I always have. But this was a tribal decision, and my people are in a predicament.

"As long as a tribe is poor, we're OK to the rest of the world," he said. "The minute you get empowered, impinge on their homes, you're a wagon burner."

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